

Rabbi Wurzburger is Editor Emeritus of *Tradition*.

BREUER AND KANT

So enamored was Isaac Breuer with Immanuel Kant that, in his Frankfurt study, he prominently displayed the portrait of the German philosopher alongside that of his maternal grandfather, Sampson Raphael Hirsch. The placement of the pictures symbolized his deep-rooted conviction that the Hirschian ideology of *Torah 'im Derekh 'Erets* (the attempt to synthesize Orthodox Judaism with modern culture) could best be formulated by employing Kantian philosophical categories. While one may be tempted to compare Breuer's relationship to Kant with that of Maimonides' to Aristotle, one must not gloss over one essential difference. Although Maimonides made extensive use of Aristotelian doctrines, he harbored no illusions about the utter incompatibility of Judaism and Aristotelianism. It was one thing to utilize some of the Aristotelian categories of thought, and another to embrace the entire system. Breuer, on the other hand, maintained that the Kantian system as such could be purged of all elements that conflict with Torah teachings. Such modifications would not merely result in the elimination of features that rendered Kantian doctrines unacceptable to Judaism, but would redound to the benefit of the Kantian philosophy itself. Had Kant been able to avail himself of the perspectives of a believing Jew, he could have avoided—so Breuer contends—many of the pitfalls and shortcomings which mar his philosophy. One may be tempted to recall the famous poster advertising a Yiddish performance of a Shakespearian play on the lower East Side of New York, which read: “Hamlet by William Shakespeare—*Ibersetst und varbessert* (translated and improved) by Maurice Schwartz.”

In Breuer's opinion, whatever corrections were necessary in the Kantian position in order to accommodate Torah perspectives would, far from compromising the philosophical rigor of the Kantian system, actually result in vast improvements over the original formulation. In other words, if Kant had been a believing Jew, his philosophical genius would have enabled him to arrive at conclusions which would have rendered his system more appealing and comprehensive.

At first blush, it seems rather strange that an Orthodox Jewish thinker should have developed such an affinity for the position of a philosopher

who displayed such a negative attitude towards Judaism that he did not even regard it as a religion but treated it as a legal system designed for a particular *body politic*, a legal code devoid of all spiritual significance. To be sure, there were other Jewish philosophers who were equally ardent Kantians and who dismissed Kant's cavalier treatment of Judaism as a manifestation of ignorance rather than of theological antisemitism.¹ But it is one thing for a Reform philosopher such as Hermann Cohen to embrace Kantian doctrines, with their accent upon autonomy as the hallmark of ethics, and another for an Orthodox thinker, who emphasizes heteronomy as evidenced by blind obedience to divine commandments, to endorse enthusiastically such an orientation. After all, for Cohen, divine revelation was reduced to endowing man with the kind of rational faculties through which moral laws can be discerned. It is therefore hardly surprising that he was attracted to the world view of Kant, who placed such a premium upon human autonomy that he categorically rejected the religious value of an act that is motivated by abject surrender to the divine will, and who went so far as to censure Abraham for his readiness to carry out what he believed was a divine command to sacrifice his son. Abraham, so Kant argues, should have realized that God could not have issued a command that violates the categorical imperative. But Breuer was in an entirely different position. How was it possible for a devotee of Hirsch, who had placed such emphasis upon unquestioning and unconditional compliance with the heteronomous law that he was branded by Reform thinkers as an advocate of "Kadaver-gehorsam" (the obedience characterizing a cadaver which is unworthy of a rational human being), to align himself with the Kantian camp?

Breuer, however, contended that, apart from conflicting with the basic tenets of Orthodox Judaism, which revolves around unconditional surrender to the divine Law, the Kantian system was beset by numerous intrinsic difficulties which could be resolved only by the kind of emendations and revisions which would incorporate the basic insights of the Torah. The proposed modifications would refute the charge of empty formalism which was so often hurled against Kant by his philosophical antagonists, who maintained that since the categorical imperative was unable to provide specific moral guidelines applicable to concrete situations, Kantian ethics was pitifully inadequate. Breuer maintains that the substitution of divine Law for the purely formal rational law of the categorical imperative would truly render man free, since by following a law which provides guidance for all facets of human existence, man is extricated from the fetters of determinism which characterize the phenomenal world. It is through obedience to the divine Law that man is liberated from the bonds of nature and history and attains the objectives that Kant had striven for but was unable to reach because of the inadequacy of a moral philosophy which could not go beyond an empty formalism.

Whereas Kant's attempt to secure human freedom by placing man under the rule of the moral law had been wrecked on the shoals of pure formalism, obedience to the divine Law, so Breuer maintains, enables man to relate to the domain of the noumenal, which is not subject to the determinism governing the experience of the phenomenal world.

Reliance upon the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal also provides Breuer with a master key to the solution of a host of intellectual difficulties which modern science poses to traditional belief.² The conflicts between the Biblical account of Creation and the theory of evolution, between the traditional faith about the age of the universe and the findings of geology and astronomy, are disposed of by reference to the fact that scientific statements presuppose the applicability of the intuitions of time and space as well as the various other categories the mind imposes upon the phenomenal world to construct and organize the data of empirical experience. But such intuitions and categories are legitimate only when we deal with the world of phenomena, and are therefore by definition totally irrelevant to the process of Creation, which is a noumenon. It must be remembered that, for Kant, scientific determinism holds sway only within the confines of the phenomenal world. To speak of the metaphysical cause of the universe in the same manner in which we speak of the cause of a particular phenomenon is an illicit use of the term. This being the case, the laws of science, which presuppose the determinism of the phenomenal world, cannot refer to Creation itself. In Breuer's terminology, it was only with the arrival of the Sabbath of Creation, when the process of Creation was completed, that the laws of nature, which are based upon the determinism of the phenomenal world, became operative. Given this conceptual framework, the alleged conflict between science and religion can be shown to rest upon the confusion between scientific statements and metaphysical assertions involving the sphere of noumena, which are beyond the ken of theoretical reason.

In a similar vein, recourse to the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena enables Breuer to cope with other supernatural doctrines, such as prophecy and miracles, which are irreconcilable with scientific methodology. All data of experience, according to Kant, presuppose the validity of determinism. As long as we are dealing with the world of phenomena, we cannot possibly conceive of a phenomenon which is not caused by other natural phenomena. Hence, the intrusion of the supernatural upon the natural would represent a logical impossibility. But since Breuer claims that prophecy and miracles (just like Creation) are by definition not phenomena at all but belong to the realm of the noumenal, there is, according to Breuer, no more problem in removing them from the bonds of determinism by the laws of nature than there was in the Kantian ethical doctrine which regarded absolute freedom and purely rational determination as postulates of morality.

To be sure, Breuer uncritically assumes the validity of the Kantian premise that from a moral point of view man must be treated as a purely free being, whereas from a scientific point of view man may be treated as a totally determined being. He does not really address himself to the question of whether this is in fact an acceptable solution to the problem. What fascinates Breuer is the ability to invoke for apologetical purposes a doctrine which bears the imprimatur of one of the most seminal figures in the history of philosophy. He believes that the tenets of Orthodoxy can best be justified by showing that the divine Law is endowed with the characteristics of the noumenal realm which Kant had attributed to the moral law.

By locating the matrix of freedom not in a purely formal categorical imperative but in the divine Law of the Torah, Breuer manages to convert what Kant had intended as a dismissal of the religious significance of Judaism into its most attractive feature. To be sure, when Kant had characterized Judaism as a legal system rather than a religion, he essentially appropriated Spinoza's disdain for Judaism. But for Breuer the characterization of Judaism as a divinely ordained legal system properly conveys the very essence of Judaism, which really does not fit into the category of religion. To quote his own trenchant formulation, "Judaism is not a religion of law, but law pure and simple."³ Judaism, according to Breuer, operates on an entirely different wavelength. Its primary objective is to secure not inner personal conviction, but obedience to the divine law which constitutes and governs the nation. In the final analysis, the individual is addressed not so much as an individual but as a member of the nation which is subject to the divine law.

It is this relationship to the divine law which, like Kant's categorical imperative is totally independent of the vicissitudes of history or the bonds of naturalistic determination, accounts for the essentially ahistorical character of both Judaism and the Jewish people. As he expressed it in his autobiography, "The Jewish nation received its law outside the country and before the foundation of the state. It achieved national unity through acceptance of the law . . . even without the state, the nation remained the nation of the law, the Land remained the Land of the Law."⁴

Since Torah represents the intrusion of the eternal upon the temporal, it must be totally impervious to historic or natural processes. Hence, a nation which is constituted by the laws of the Torah essentially figures not in history, but in what Breuer terms "metahistory." This insistence upon the totally ahistorical nature of Torah was, of course, not Breuer's original insight, but can be traced back to Samson Raphael Hirsch's all-out rejection of the Reform claim that "the spirit of the times," which for the Hegelians served as the vehicle of divine revelation in history, shaped the development of religious norms and practices. But while the doctrine itself was hardly new, the employment of Kantian categories rendered the

doctrine of the timelessness and eternal validity of Torah much more plausible to a philosophically sophisticated readership. The distinction between phenomena and noumena provided Breuer, to quote his own words, "with a weapon . . . to protect Judaism effectively."⁵ Since revelation, according to Breuer, relates not to the phenomenal but the noumenal world, it follows that its meaning and significance must be completely independent of time, space, history and science, which involve modes of determinism applicable only to the phenomenal world. Thus Breuer manages to dispose of the main objections to the Hirschian position, which was denounced by its opponents for its alleged obscurantism as evidenced by its utter disregard of the findings of critical historical scholarship. By relegating Torah to the noumenal realm, Breuer felt that he had succeeded in extricating the world view of traditional Judaism from the stranglehold of science in the same manner as Kant had brought about the total emancipation of ethics from the grip of historic or naturalistic determinism. To be sure, as we previously noted, Kant himself has never explained how one can view a human being simultaneously as both a phenomenon and a noumenon. By the same token, Breuer fails to provide a satisfactory explanation of how one can treat the reading of a text at one and the same time as an event of the phenomenal world, while insisting that it represents an incursion of the noumenal world that, by definition, cannot be interpreted in accordance with the categories which are indispensable to the perception and understanding of the phenomenal world.

Be that as it may, the insistence that the role and function of Israel is not carried out in history but in metahistory also provides the conceptual framework for Breuer's radical opposition to Zionism, which, as a secular nationalistic movement, committed the grievous error of treating the Jewish people as a purely historical phenomenon. Just as Torah cannot be treated as a form of religion, but represents a category *sui generis* of the noumenal world, so must the nature and function of the Jewish people be seen in the light of its own unique metahistorical role, as a people that is constituted by Torah. This stance also provides Breuer with a philosophical rationale for adopting his grandfather's secessionist position, which frowns upon any formal association with Jews who, by their refusal to subscribe to the binding authority of the Torah, unabashedly proclaim their unwillingness to acknowledge the metahistorical character of the Jewish people. This consideration outweighs for Breuer all other factors that would dictate cooperation with non-Orthodox Jews in areas of common concern. Insofar as Breuer is concerned, highest priority must be assigned to safeguarding the conception of the utterly metahistorical nature of both Torah and Israel in its pristine purity. In this fashion the Kantian conceptual scheme, as reinterpreted by Breuer, makes it possible to present the basic tenets of Hirschian neo-Orthodoxy not just as an

amalgam of dogmatic fundamentalist positions, but as a philosophically respectable and appealing religious ideology.

NOTES

This essay was originally presented at the Isaac Breuer Symposium held at Yeshiva University in December 1983.

1. Julius Guttmann, "Kant und das Judentum," *Schriften Herausgegeben von der Gesellschaft zur Forderung der Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 1908; Hermann Cohen, "Innere Beziehung der Kantischen Philosophie zum Judentum," *Judische Schriften*, pp. 284–305.
2. Isaac Breuer, *Concepts of Judaism*, selected and edited by Jacob S. Levinger (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 111–165.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
4. Cited by Solomon Ehrmann, "Isaac Breuer," *Guardians of our Heritage*, Leo Jung, ed. (1958), p. 628.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 626.